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Hugging their security blanket

WASHINGTON—Eerie memories: On June 23, 1972, two of President Nixon's intimate advisers, H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, tried to spook the FBI off the Watergate investigation to avoid endangering "national security."

They had Deputy CIA Director Vernon Walters tell Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray to drop an investigation into money-laundering in Mexico. But Walters dug in his heels.

"I did not believe that... asking the FBI to lay off this investigation on the spurious grounds that it would uncover covert operations would serve the President," Walters later told the Watergate committee.

Instead of laying off, Gray told Nixon, "The case could not be covered up and it would lead quite high and he felt the President should get rid of the people that were involved. Any attempt to involve the FBI or the CIA in this case would almost prove a mortal wound."

Gray was right on all counts. How tragic now, 14 years later, to see Attorney General Edwin Meese making the fatal mistake that Walters and Gray avoided: Meese admitted Wednesday night that he had asked the FBI to lay off its investigation of the Iran-Contra scandal for "national security" reasons.

No, it's not Watergate. But in 14 years the instincts of the panicky presidential bureaucracy have not changed. Reagan's men are desperately trying to plug the leaks, stop the investigations, invoke that supreme, overriding principle—national security—to prevent the world from discovering the truth about their misjudgments and possible crimes.

Three times now, the Justice Department has held the FBI off the Iran-Contra investigation:

1. On Oct. 30, Meese directed Associate Attorney General Stephen Trott to tell FBI Director William Webster to delay an investigation of Southern Air Transport Co., the former CIA-run airline that was delivering arms to Nicaragua.

Meese said national security adviser John Poindexter told him the investigation might delay the release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon—although as of Oct. 30, there was no indication, according to Meese, that there was any connection between hostages and Contras.

2. In late November, Meese kept the FBI out of the initial interrogation of Lt. Col. Oliver North. Webster did not learn that crimes may have been committed until he saw Meese on TV.

3. Earlier this year, the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division told the FBI not to investigate a nationwide series of 40 burglaries in which documents were stolen from organizations opposed to the Nicaraguan Contra operation.

And now there is a fourth complaint. The Treasury Department told Justice last month that an "improper" attempt was made to interfere with a Customs Service investigation into Southern Air Transport.

Who wields the power to halt federal investigations? Almost anyone who can plausibly cloak himself with the authority of the President—or as the title of the Watergate book had it, "All the President's Men." In 1972, it did not even occur to CIA Director Richard Helms to challenge the White House request to block the investigation.

'HERE WAS Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Ehrlichman, the two most senior officials in the White House next to the President himself, giving this instruction," Helms testified. "And I really feel now, as I did then, that it would have been presumptuous to have pressed them any harder as to how they had come up with this, or where they had gotten the idea, or who was behind it."

The President's men wield enormous power. They can even destroy a President. The attempt to cover up Watergate was fatal, a far bigger wound than that "third-rate burglary" of Democratic headquarters.

Nobody in the Reagan White House or cabinet seems to remember this lesson. They are too busy covering up.